The world of

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BUDDHISM

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'They will be Lords upon the Island': Buddhism in Sri Lanka

MICHAEL B. CARRITHERS

THE BUDDHISM OF SRI LANKA (Ceylon, as it used to be called) and of Southeast Asia is the School of Elders, Theravāda. 'School of the Elders' indeed: it would best be thought of as that school which, as Buddhism grew and expanded, continually inclined toward the conservative choice, the preservation of an archaic view of Doctrine and of the Order of monks, the Sangha. This view of the Doctrine is crystallized in the commentaries to the Canon, which were finally edited in Sri Lanka in the 5th century AD. These are devoted to rejecting change, to certifying the original sense of every word of the Buddha. In the same spirit, the Sangha is conceived as a fraternity observing, in the minutest detail, its original way of life as conducted under the Buddha.

In this stern and uncompromising attitude there is little place for the idea, developed in other schools of Buddhism, that laymen may achieve Enlightenment, or that Enlightenment may be achieved without the monastic code, the Discipline. The highest ideal is that of the *arhat*, the monk who attains Enlightenment for himself by following meticulously the Path laid down by the Buddha. And in this view the Sangha is radically different from, and superior to, the life of the layman. For the monk has *attained* the Discipline, that is, his spiritual training in the Discipline is the first hard step towards that wisdom so difficult to discern amidst the unregulated sensual confusion of lay life.

In fact, if one were to seek *one* theme, *one* idea, which could be said to underlie the Theravāda Sangha, it would be the Discipline: a word applied both to the monastic code and to the moral purity embodied in the code. This is so in several senses. First, the attributes of the monk – shaven head, robes, begging bowl – and the monk's deportment – reserved, upright, calm, eyes downcast – are the outward expression of the monk's inner commitment to follow the Discipline, which itself prescribes this behaviour. In another sense, each rule can be consistently reasoned on grounds that it conduces in one way or another to mental calm, and therefore to spiritual insight. An eminent Sri Lankan forest-monk once told me that the whole of the Buddhist teaching could be summarized as a commentary upon the Discipline.

'A nation at prayer'

In these senses, therefore, the Discipline is the guiding principle of the Sangha. But there is another meaning given to the Discipline in Theravāda; and this, despite the efforts of the elders to preserve the original, does represent a substantial change. In ancient India the Discipline had been codified as part of the spiritual Path of a small body of religious mendicants, acquainted with each other face-to-face, each seeking his own salvation. Discipline was significant to the Buddhist ascetics only. But then came the change: for as Buddhism came to Sri Lanka – it is impossible to trace the process closely – Discipline became the guiding principle of an established religion, of a nation 'at prayer', of what Heinz Bechert aptly characterized as one of the most ancient nation-states, with its common religion, common language, common culture and common polity all within a single territory. (The language is Sinhalese, and the majority of the people are Sinhalese Buddhists.)

The significance of this is revealed in the commentarial legend of the conversion of Sri Lanka by the missionary monk Mahinda in the mid-3rd century BC. According to that account, the king of Sri Lanka eagerly accepted the new faith, and enthusiastically went to work building great monasteries and shrines – the appurtenances of established Buddhism, as churches and cathedrals are the appurtenances of the established Church of England. After a good deal of building, the king asked the missionary whether Buddhism could now be considered established. Mahinda replied that it was established, but would not take root until a Sri Lankan, born of Sri Lankan parents, took the robes in Sri Lanka, learned the Discipline in Sri Lanka, and recited it in Sri Lanka. In other words, no Buddhism without the Sangha, and no Sangha without the Discipline. And indeed Sinhalese historians, who were always monks, tended to add: no Sri Lanka without Buddhism.

The end of one cycle of earthly existence, perhaps the last? In about 1900 this monk's funeral was photographed in Burma. The body lies on a bier with high pagoda-like superstructure, all of which is consumed by the flames. (35)

So the monk became a figure with public responsibility, guiding the morals of a nation. Much of later Sri Lankan history concerns the efforts of kings to keep the Sangha 'pure', well Disciplined, fit for its task; and even the prosperity of the nation ultimately depended upon its morality. This public duty might be thought to conflict with that of the monk seeking his own salvation. But the Sinhalese commentators and later Sinhalese monks were able to satisfy their appetite for consistency. For them the monk, though passive and chiefly concerned with his own Discipline, nevertheless acts as an exemplar. He is, in the words of a contemporary monk, a street-light, going nowhere, doing nothing, but enabling the laity to see their way in this dark world of moral confusion. In the commentarial literature the monk's morality is a fragrance, permeating the universe. Right down to the present this master image of the Sangha has remained bright and untarnished in the Sri Lankan imagination: it is the image of a stern and upright monk, unrelenting in his asceticism, retiring from the world but unequivocal in his moral judgments of the world. But at the same time it must be borne in mind that it is an *ideal*: if all monks were perfect, there would be no need for it.

This is not, however, merely a matter of human frailty. For the process that brought Buddhism to be the religion of a nation was accompanied by other equally profound changes in the Sangha. Monks acted in new roles, and though every effort was made to assimilate these to the Discipline, they were often quite contrary to it. In the rest of this chapter, I will describe the development of these roles and their consequences for the Sangha. There are four: the monk as literate ceremonial specialist, as landlord, as politician, and as reforming forest-dweller. A good deal of the material will be drawn from the classical period of Sinhalese Buddhism, before AD 1214, when a brutal and especially oppressive invader from India broke the ancient order of Sinhalese civilization, which never fully recovered. The Sangha of today in Sri Lanka, and in Southeast Asia, took on its most important features in the one-and-a-half thousand years before that invasion.

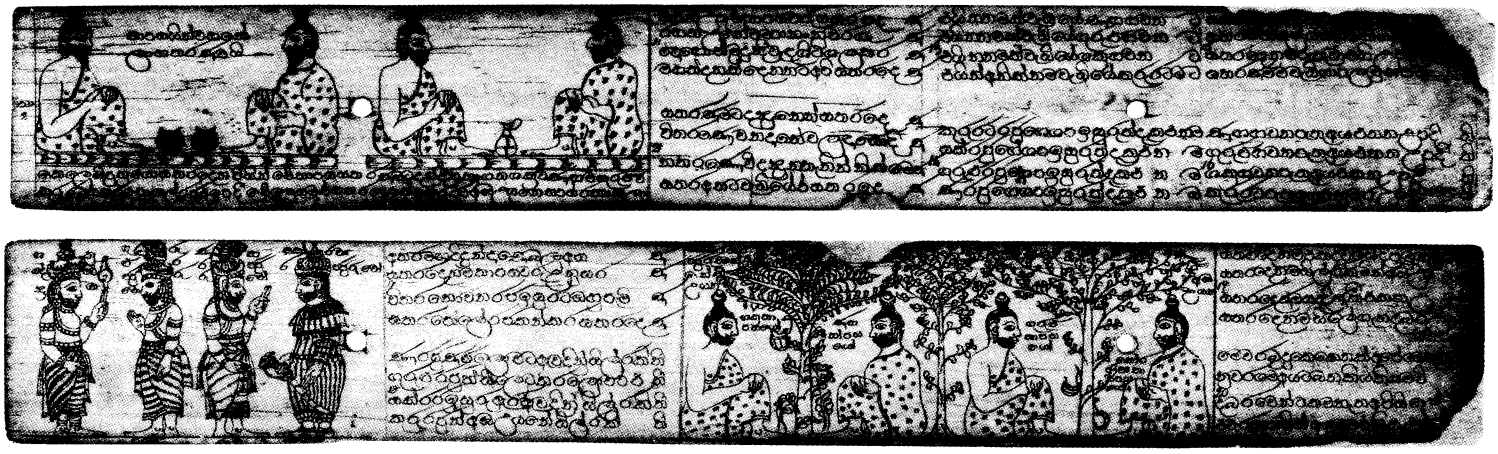
The monk as teacher, preacher, and priest

To return to the Sangha's beginning: the Sangha held one view of itself from very early days which was even stricter, and certainly more archaic, than that of the passive moral exemplar. This was the image of the solitary and peripatetic monk, bound both by specific Disciplinary rule and by the whole tenor of his philosophy to eschew the productive (and reproductive) activities of the householder. The monk must produce neither his own food, nor his own garb, nor may he house himself. These prohibitions have indeed always been relevant to the monk in his role as passive exemplar. But, for that original ascetic, his well cultivated desire-for-little, *alpecchatā*, rendered these prohibitions not into social responsibility, but into freedom, that is, independence of other people. Hence, 'like the moon, he is a stranger among families'. He begs silently from house to house for his food, he gathers his robe from scraps of cloth left with corpses on the charnel ground, he lives in caves and beneath trees. He has truly 'gone forth into homelessness'.

Yet this perfect moral economy of poverty has probably always been less the norm than the ideal, practised only by a very few. Even in the ancient canonical writings it appears chiefly in exhortations and pious reminiscences, while the more circumstantial accounts suggest that, even then, laymen invited monks for meals, gave them robes, and built them shelter: this is rather more likely to be the norm in an institution, because it provides security, and need not *in itself* temper the asceticism. But it has a further corollary. If the monks received something of value from the laity, the laity received something of value from the monks: 'the gift of the Teaching is the best gift'. The Canon is full of stories of laymen and laywomen hearing a sermon, being converted, and then piously supporting the Sangha – and not only the Sangha in general, but particular monks for their particular virtues. The relationship between monks and laymen, though then as today neither contractual nor exclusive, was more or less enduring, and might reasonably be phrased as a long-term exchange: spiritual good for material support. The history of the Sangha is the gradual unfolding of the implications of this exchange.

Let us follow one chain of implications: what precisely did the laity receive from the monks? They received merit. In its purest sense merit simply refers to that which is psychically wholesome and therefore good. This of course goes with the view that the monk imparts wisdom to the laity, and the laity gratefully and generously offer him material necessities. But already in the Indian, canonical period, merit was also curiously substantial, and could be accrued, for three purposes. It could be stored up by oneself for a better rebirth; it could be given to dead relatives for their future welfare; or it could be given to gods so that they would help one in some worldly aim. These correspond very roughly to the three chief services provided for the laity by monks in Sri Lanka today, and probably since the earliest days: preaching, presiding at funerals, and chanting *pirit*, texts designed to improve one's material and physical state. Some sort of meal or gift for the participant monks accompanies each of these ceremonies, and it is this exchange of wise and powerful words for a meal (in Sinhalese *dānaya*, originally lay 'generosity', but now just 'monk's meal') that is the source of merit and the core of further ceremonial elaborations.

This ceremonial service, however, created a role for the monk which is quite different from that of strict world renouncer – in fact, the Sangha became the body of literate ceremonial specialists *for* society who form its majority today. Though the logic of this development is clear, its history is not. For the period before the 5th century AD in Sri Lanka the commentaries reveal that the chanting of *pirit* was a recognized ceremony;



The jātaka stories, tales of the Buddha's previous lives, constitute a corpus of folklore with a moral for the Buddhist. This 18th-century palm-leaf manuscript illustrates the popular tale of the 'Vidhura-paṇḍita Jātaka'. In this episode, four kings meditate in a forest.

monks probably attended funerals; and the number and nature of tales about sermons imply that they were a major activity, even a major public entertainment. The real evidence lies in monastic education, though, for it is the education of monks chiefly, if not solely, for a ceremonial role that bears witness to the predominance of ceremony in monastic life in latter-day Sri Lanka.

There is one brief passage in the commentary to the Discipline which reveals at what stage it was thought appropriate for a monk in early Sri Lanka to give up learning and become a 'scholar of the world, able to live under his own mastery wherever he likes'. This was perhaps the basic instruction for the monks of the countryside. They had to learn the basic 227 Disciplinary rules, the rules of legal procedure within the Sangha, and one subject of meditation. Beyond this rather elementary preparation they had three tasks. First, they had to memorize one of a list of pious stories 'in order to regale those present', certainly laymen. Second, they had to learn three formulae, one for reciting when invited for a meal, another for auspicious occasions, and a third for inauspicious occasions. Today the auspicious occasions are sermons and *pirit* ceremonies, the inauspicious are funerals, and they must have been the same then. Third, the monks had to learn 'four sections of scripture for announcing the Teaching'.

This is certainly an education for the preacher, and indeed from the Buddha's own day till the present preaching has been one of the main activities of monks. What developed in Sri Lanka was a number of elaborations, among which may be counted more or less large-scale public performances, in which two or more monks took part. A more significant change is traceable in the *pirit* ceremony. It is certainly present in ancient India and early Sri Lanka, but it is difficult to decide from this account of early Sangha education whether it was yet important. From other evidence we may infer that it gathered importance, however, and by the 10th century AD it was a chief part of monastic education: for by then the 'four sections' certainly referred to a primer consisting of some basic catechistical material, but above all of texts for *pirit* chanting. Indeed, we learn from a king's inscription of that century that suppliants were to know this primer by heart before entering the Sangha. By the Kandyan period, the 17th century and later, the primer contained most of the knowledge necessary for an ordinary monk in the Kandyan kingdom. It is still a central part of monastic education today.

It is not only that the Sangha was gradually and insensibly entangled in ritual services for laymen. The effect was much deeper: it became inconceivable that the Sinhalese laity could live a civilized, human life at all without the Sangha to make their merit and bury their dead. It is no wonder that by far the majority of extant Sinhalese art, architecture and literature is explicitly Buddhist, either devotional or homiletic. Most of the literature is by monks; most of the architecture is for monks or influenced by monks; and most of the painting and sculpture is executed under the tutelage of monks. Indeed – one could cite the famous Toṭagamuvē Srī Rāhula, an elder of the 15th century – even quite secular verse, celebrating the beauty of women and the glory of kings, was penned in the monastery. On the other hand, the fire-and-brimstone sermons of the preachers must have worked a terrible mastery over the minds of layfolk – scenes of otherworldly torture still enliven the walls of temples today. In traditional Sri Lanka, cultural hegemony lay in the hands of the Sangha, and the exercise of this hegemony became for most monks their chief or only concern.

Other literate specialities, such as the teaching of reading and writing, fell to the Sangha's lot very early. Some monks even practised medicine, a very literate skill, and astrology. Of course they also kept the chronicle history of Sri Lanka, since, in their view, the

history of Sri Lanka is the history of Buddhism, and a good deal of the Buddhist theory of the kingdom must be laid at their door. Much of this is against specific Disciplinary injunction, but it would have been impossible for Buddhism to become the religion of a people without this entanglement of the Sangha in their affairs.

Nor does it go unjustified. The inner sense that draws these different vocations together is that they are all *lō vāḍa*, work for the welfare of the world. Preaching, teaching and scholarship for the welfare of lay minds, *pirit* and medicine for their bodies. This is, to be sure, an active ideal, quite different from the passive moral ideal, but it is founded on the monk's fitness to be a teacher. The English scholar Rhys Davids reflected the view of learned Sinhalese elders nicely when he wrote that the Sangha's mission was to 'devote their lives to the acquisition of the highest wisdom, and fit themselves to teach and guide others out of the pleasant path leading towards misery into the harder path that leads towards true happiness and liberation'. In this sense both the chanting of *pirit* and the writing of the national chronicle were 'for the pious joy of the faithful'.

The difficulty arises when in practice the monks' fulfilment of these traditional duties becomes an end in itself; then they act as a traditional class in society, rather than for a moral principle. This is exacerbated by monks becoming landholders or landlords.

The monk as landlord

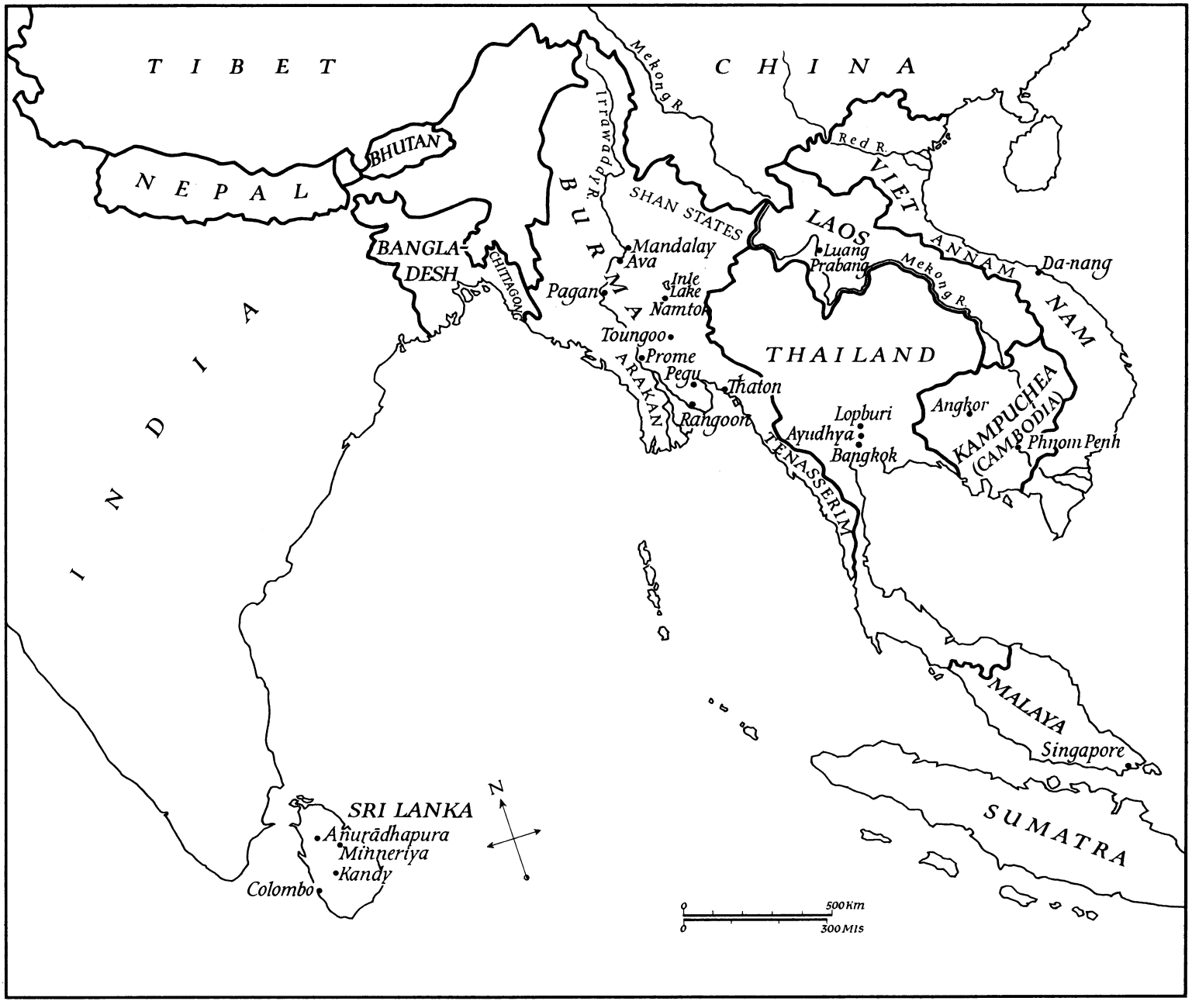
The development of the role of literate ceremonial specialist – parish priest – implied a corresponding development of enduring arrangements to feed, clothe and house the Sangha. At the most modest this meant that the monk became the incumbent of a small dwelling with the surrounding ground, and his food and robes might have been seen to, as in poor rural temples today, by the arrangement of a rota among his villagers. At the least modest the Sangha became lords and heirs of vast estates, encompassing not only land and villages, but also irrigation, reservoirs, canals and plantations. By the end of the great period of Sinhalese civilization, monks had been so long and deeply embroiled in the political economy that a Sri Lankan king's genealogy (that of the 13th-century king Parakkamabāhu II) was traced proudly to an ancient lineage of lay temple functionaries.

The logic of this grander development derives not only from the exchange of support for spiritual services, but also from the encounter of the Sangha with an agrarian, hierarchical social order. That the society was agrarian simply meant that the Sangha, to ensure perennial support, had to control its own farm land. That society was hierarchical meant that it had to control the labourers, the people who worked the land. In other words, far from remaining outside society as renouncers of the world, monks came to stand at the very centre, with the attributes and status of great feudal lords. As usual, the logic of this is clearer than the history, but four periods in the development may conveniently be distinguished. The first is the ancient Indian period of the Canon, when the process had already begun and Disciplinary rules were laid down against it. The second is the early period in Sri Lanka down to the 2nd century AD, in which the peculiarly Sinhalese features of monastic landlordism emerged. Third, in a transitional period lasting roughly until the 9th century AD society grew larger and more complex, and the Sangha's involvement grew deeper. In the last period, from the 9th century until the 12th, the monasteries were arguably the greatest landlords in Ceylon.

To begin with the canonical period: it is clear that the basic components were already present. In the Canon one reads of land being given to the Sangha, though this is usually unproductive land, a forest or park. More significantly, there is a brief mention of how much of a crop is due to the Sangha if someone plants on Sangha land, and how much is due to the Sangha if its seeds are used. And there is the puzzling story of the monk Pilindavaccha, to whom King Bimbisāra, the Buddha's contemporary, gave a village of five hundred monastery servants. The bare details of this lend themselves to various interpretations, but there is no doubt that the tale looks forward to the feudal Sinhalese Sangha, rather than back to the homeless and propertyless monks depicted in other parts of the Canon.

Indeed, the rules of the Discipline may be read as a systematic attempt to ward off the consequences that these developments entailed. The rules provide that monks should neither dig the earth nor have someone else dig the earth; neither cut living plants nor have someone else cut plants; and not be given uncooked rice, the staple food. Furthermore, monks should receive their cooked food from the hands of laymen. Thus the Discipline attempts to ensure that the monks do not engage, nor engage others, in productive activity, so preserving the status of religious beggars. But material wealth was given to the Sangha, and the Discipline was forced to recognize a category of lay people to look after it, as servants in the monastery. It also recognized a category of persons interposed between the material goods and the monks, whose function was to hand over the necessities of life to monks at the appropriate time – when, for example, the monks needed new robes, and not before. These lay functionaries were called 'those who make fitting', a legal classification which came in Sri Lanka to cover a whole microcosm of laymen attached to monasteries, from high nobility to slaves.

The early period in Sri Lanka may conveniently be assumed to run from Buddhism's arrival in the mid-3rd century BC down to the 2nd century AD. In this period irrigation reservoirs remained relatively small – at the end of the period the first reservoirs were built with perimeters measured in miles – and we may infer from this and other more direct evidence that society was still



Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, showing the sites mentioned in this section.

relatively simple. Yet two characteristically Sinhalese developments in this period are clear: first, the monks were given a status very like that of lay lords, and second, the monks were quite practically involved in irrigation, that is, in the management of reservoirs and the people who depended upon the reservoirs.

The monks' attainment of lordship status is signalled by a shift in the terms that were used to refer to them. In the Canon, though the Buddha or monks might occasionally be likened to persons of secular power, it is clear that they were thought of as having a quite different kind of respectability, and this is reflected in the terms used for monks as opposed to laity. Sri Lankan sources, however, gradually began to blend the two. Thus, for example, the commentarial account of the Sangha's arrival in the island has soothsayers exclaiming of the monks, 'they will be lords in the island!' The word for 'lords', *issarā*, has an unmistakably secular significance; and though in the immediate context the reference is merely to the ascendancy of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, it portends quite a new way of regarding the Sangha. Another source, the earliest stone inscriptions of Sri Lanka, shows the same honorifics being used interchangeably for monks and laymen. In later Sri Lanka, monks, lords and kings were always referred to in very similar terms.

This was not merely a matter of language. Many of the earliest stone inscriptions, belonging to the first four centuries of Buddhism in Ceylon, record gifts of caves, which were prepared as dwellings for monks. Many of these were given by ostensibly noble persons . . . but others were given by monks. While the amount of labour involved in preparing a cave may not have been very great, it nevertheless betokens the power of a monk to command laymen. Monks had already become local notables of the peasant landscape. The commentaries reflect such a figure indirectly in the description of the 'great elder of the residence', the monk who takes executive responsibility for a monastery.

It was only natural that monasteries in fact be given to individual monks, though this was a contravention of the letter and the spirit of the Discipline. The convention in ancient India and Sri Lanka had been that monasteries or dwellings be given to 'the Sangha of the four quarters'. This legal fiction presupposed that the Sangha was effectively separated as a corporate body from the laity. Yet it must have been the case that many of the gifts to 'the Sangha of the four quarters' were in fact to a local 'great elder of the residence'. The national chronicle first records a gift in this spirit for the reign of King Vaṭṭagāmaṇī (89–77 BC), who gave a presumably grand monastery to the monk Mahātissa, who had helped the king in adversity. Later Sinhalese monks saw this as the beginning of a long and morally dubious process, but it was more likely just a recognition in name of something which, in form, had been going on for generations, or centuries.

But it was the Sangha's involvement with productive agriculture which set the seal on the monks' entanglement as landlords in Sinhalese society. Many of the gifts recorded in the early inscriptions are interests in, or ownership of, reservoirs, fields and villages. Indeed they are very nearly the same thing, for the reservoir irrigates the paddy (rice) fields in a small valley, and the villagers who live at the edges of the field live from it, give a proportion of the crop to the monks, and maintain the reservoir. Sometimes the grants were merely a portion of the dues which were paid by the villagers to the lord who had built, owned or oversaw the maintenance of the reservoir. On other occasions, however – as in an inscription attributable to the same King Vaṭṭagāmaṇī of the 1st century BC – a reservoir and attached villages were given to a particular monastery.

A less laconic source is the commentaries, which tally very well with the evidence from inscriptions. Their witness is chiefly in the form of extensions of Disciplinary rulings to cover new cases, and they attempt wherever possible to maintain the formal separation of monks from property and productive activities, in the face of growing involvement *de facto*. Thus, for example, the commentary states that the Sangha may not accept a reservoir . . . unless it is offered with the formula that it is intended to provide the Sangha with the four requisites: alms-food, robes, shelter and medicine. Slaves are to be accepted, not as such, but as 'those who make fitting', or as servants of the *monastery*. And money – which was used by monks in a slightly later period to buy land, according to one inscription – can be handed over to 'those who make fitting' for the monastery, or for the four requisites, but the monks must not touch it.

In fact the commentaries are quite circumstantial in their directions concerning land management by monks. Thus, the Discipline forbids a monk to order someone to dig the earth; but the commentary explains that if the monk says, 'dig a *pond*' – for a pond is that which is *already* dug – it does not transgress the rule. Sometimes the advice is quite practical. The monk is told how to see that everyone cultivating a set of paddy fields gets a fair share of water; and, when one set of tenants leaves because oppressed by the king, and is replaced by another set who do not pay rent to the monks, the monks are justified in withholding water . . . but only in the ploughing season.

At this very early period, therefore, all the characteristics of monastic landlordism were present. There must have been, then as now, a considerable difference between the relatively large landed monasteries of the capital and the small village temples with, perhaps, no more than a few coconut trees on the grounds. But the Sangha as a whole must have been coloured by these developments. No doubt the provision of permanent support could have had the intended effect of allowing monks simply to go about their ascetic business securely. Landholding, however, tended generally to draw the Sangha closer to the laity in attitude and social position, to domesticate the Sangha, to render it no longer, in any sense, 'homeless'.

This process must have continued through the third, transitional, period. By the 3rd century AD more village tanks had been built, from which we may infer a population increase; and in the next century some of the greatest public works were erected: the vast Minneriya reservoir of King Mahasena (AD 274–301), and the huge Jetavana Stupa, with a diameter of 112 metres (367 feet). From this period onward the irrigation works grew more extensive, and the order of society, without altering its fundamentally hierarchical character, grew more complex. The architecture of monasteries in the capital, Anurādhapura, reflected this change – they grew grander and more decorated – and so too did the social organization of the Sangha.

Hence, by the greatest period of Sinhalese civilization, the 9th to the 12th centuries, the Sangha, encrusted with privilege, was an ancient and central organ of an ancient and highly complicated society. This is the fourth and final period of the Sangha's development as landlords, when it is very likely that the monks, taken together, owned more land in the island than the Crown or any other class. We owe a good deal of our knowledge of this period to especially informative stone inscriptions. Dynasties had come and gone;

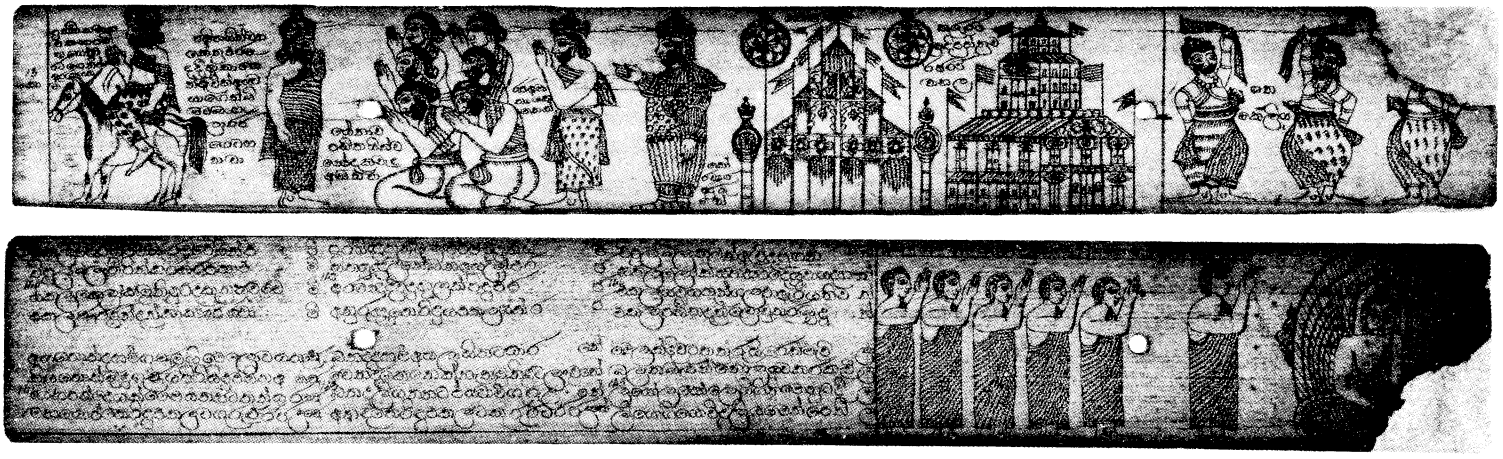
relations between sectors of society had altered and been adjudicated; and rights in land and labour had been claimed, lost, and re-established. Against this too evident flux, kings and ministers took to cutting the details of grants, property rights, even laws, in stone. Frequently on the stones appeared the sun and moon, expressing the command that the grant or law should last as long as those heavenly bodies. Or they might bear the image of a dog or crow, to remind anyone, including the next king, that if the grant were violated or the monastery despoiled, the perpetrator would be reborn as such a disgusting animal.

As complex as the arrangements of society were the arrangements of the Sangha. This may be glimpsed through the Jetavanārāma Sanskrit inscription of the 9th century. The inscription lies within the grounds of what was then a large monastic establishment in the capital: it prescribes that one hundred monks be supported within the monastery. The inscription, of which only a portion survives, mentions by name eight villages owned by the monastery, but many more are alluded to, directly or indirectly. Though overall administration must have lain ultimately in the hands of the 'great elder of the residence', in subsidiary monasteries in the villages themselves lived monks who were delegated to oversee the collection of income. Thus: 'the three monks who live with two novices in Lahasika Monastery will oversee properly [the villages] Lahasika, Urulgonu and the villages for [supplying] monastery repairs and robes. They will have the revenue from the householders [in the villages] brought to the [chief] monastery. Having had the accounts exhibited by the assistants and accountants to monks appointed by the Sangha, they shall live at will with blameless attendants.' Even in this bald summary the scale of things is clear: the many villages, the monks posted as overseers, the accountants, the villagers, the attendants, the central administration. On the one hand, there is a division of labour within the Sangha – some oversee the property, others administer, while yet others pursue their studies within the main monastery. On the other hand, there is a complete order of lay society arranged around the monks: the inscription mentions not only villagers, accountants and assistants (probably the same as attendants, and possibly drawn from the villages themselves), but also skilled stone-masons and carpenters, overseers and a chief lay administrator who seems to have been given some acres of paddy land in each village: he would have been a rich and powerful man. And there is evidence that several thousand monks in the capital were supported by one such cluster of monasteries or another.

The real strength of this vast edifice of monastic landholding is revealed in its statutory autonomy, its possession of legal power. A general feature of the ancient Indian and Sri Lankan kingdoms was that, though final recourse to force, and nominal spiritual ownership of land, lay always with the king, lesser lords enjoyed power over land and people which was in effect a copy of the king's power. In practice this was embodied in the form of the grants of villages given to nobles, to the Sangha, or to religious institutions (such as the Temple of the Tooth, the great relic-shrine of the Buddha). Such grants were accompanied by lists of immunities which guaranteed that the king's officers would not interfere in the villages, and such lists were often set on a stone at the village boundary. The provisions were often quite specific: royal officers of this rank and that, archers, guards, tax-collectors, and so forth, should not enter a certain village, nor should goods, corvée labour or livestock be demanded from the villagers. Such inscriptions sometimes also included clauses implying that monastery functionaries were responsible for the administration of justice as well, if not for capital punishment. These large monasteries in the capital, in other words, held lordship over small kingdoms within the kingdom.

By the end of this period the Sangha had come to be written about as wholly composed of eight such 'establishments' (*āyatana*) – though there seem to have been more than eight – and this usage reveals how greatly their political and economic significance had influenced the monks' conception of themselves. The elders in such establishments were lords indeed, and in many contexts acted as lords: one inscription of the late 10th century records the grant, by such an elder, of about nine hundred grains of gold to provide beverages for the monks of an establishment monastery in the capital. Later, in the 13th century, this had gone so far that a monk was found endowing the Sangha with land! And it is not surprising that monks acting with such royal prerogative were often themselves royal by birth. Those legends of the origins of the establishments that have come down to us record that their founding elders were relations of royalty or retired kings who, in renouncing the world for this sort of monastic life, found a vocation befitting their birth. It would be fair to speak of 'princes of the church'.

Indeed, the final sign of the interpenetration of the lay order with the Sangha was the close link in kinship between lay lords and the great elders. In the 12th century this complex monastic civilization enjoyed a silver age under the brilliant and ruthless Parakkamabāhu I, but at the beginning of the 13th century a brutal invader from south India systematically reduced its social edifice to rubble, dispersing the monks and enslaving the nobility. The next Sinhalese king to enjoy undisputed power was Parakkamabāhu II (1236–70), who attempted to restore the previous glory of the landed Sangha by proclamation. In so doing he had explicitly to legislate matters that had usually remained in the sphere of unrecorded custom, so that by reading his proclamation we can gather what that Sangha had been – a traditional body ruled at the top by a *de facto* hierarchy of family privilege and caste monopoly. (It is only fair, however, to note that within these bounds, or in spite of them, the ancient ascetic philosophy of the Discipline lived on.)



Two more sections of the palm-leaf manuscript illustrated on p. 135. The upper leaf shows the wise Vidhura, the future Buddha, returning in triumph to his royal master. In the lower, six disciples, leading monks, worship the Buddha.

In the next centuries, following the depredations not only of the Indian invader but perhaps also of the malaria mosquito, Sinhalese civilization was confined chiefly to the hills and less irrigable western plain. In the last period, that of the Kandyan kingdom of the 17th and 18th centuries, the Sinhalese held sway only in the interior, while Europeans ruled the coasts. In the Kandyan period the Sangha retained its privileges as landlords. Indeed, monks were sometimes *only* landlords, for the ordination tradition died out three times and, since only fully ordained monks could ordain new monks, elders had to be brought from Southeast Asia to ordain the holders of monastic grants. By this time such grants were held openly by families. This may have been the case for centuries, but only in this age of decline did it become official. Temples were passed ideally from uncle to nephew, so that one brother in every generation could be reserved for the Sangha. By disrobing while still potent, however, or by taking the robes only after a fruitful marriage, one could pass a temple on to one's son. It is from this period that is preserved the oldest really colourfully scandalous evidence of the changes wrought in the Sangha by landholding. Heirs of this tradition still have their seats in the Kandyan highlands today.

Though this is rather distant from the Discipline, it was not impossible to draw together the Sangha's moral ideal with the fact of landholding; it was even necessary that this be done, for the Sangha's endowments depended ultimately, in theory, upon their moral fitness. Ananda Coomaraswamy, in his great book on Sinhalese Kandyan art, did in fact pen a sketch of the 19th-century landholding Kandyan monk which allows us to see how the two might be reconciled. The sketch, though romanticized and in a foreign, Western, idiom, is fair to the best in the Kandyan monastic heritage:

> The principle duties of a Buddhist priest, beside the observance of the ten precepts, are to care for the *vihāra* (Buddhist temple), keep it clean, and offer flowers daily, meditate and study; receive the offerings of worshippers, administer [precepts to laymen on festival days]; explain the teachings of the Buddha when required; read and expound the scriptures . . . on special occasions . . .; perform *pirit* when required; superintend repairs to the *vihāra* buildings, and generally oversee the service of tenants; often also they taught the children and practised medicine; the priest in fact should be, often was, and sometimes still is, the intellectual centre of the village.

But at the same time it is clear that the monk adheres only to the ten Disciplinary rules of the novice, not the 227 of the full monk; and certainly the most necessary practical tasks, without which the temple could not exist as conceived, are those of worship, repair, preaching and supervision. Meditation and study take second place, and with them careful consideration of the Discipline. Those who transcend these natural limitations are remarkable men.

Monks in politics

The Sangha's involvement with Sri Lankan hierarchical order may be seen not only from the bottom, in relation to the land and villagers, but from the top, in relation to the king; and though these are but two views of the same relationship, in this latter, political, perspective a special theory of the role of the Sangha emerged, and emerged very early. In fact, the Sangha and kingship may be said to have arrived in Sri Lanka together. It was the great Indian Emperor Aśoka who sent instruments for royal consecration to the then leader of Sri Lanka; and later the emperor sent his son, the monk Mahinda, to convert the Sinhalese to Buddhism. One cannot help thinking that, whatever else the Sinhalese king found in Buddhism, he must have seen some political advantage in adopting a creed

so favoured by the great ruler in the north; and the Sangha has been embroiled in politics ever since.

The theory of the king's relation to the Sangha is deducible from two premises. First, he is a layman like other laymen, earning merit by his gifts to the Sangha and owing them obeisance because of their moral superiority. Second, he is the lord, owner, husband and enjoyer of the land, all rights flow from him, his is the ultimate recourse to force and the ultimate duty to preserve the institutions of society. He is, in other words, the state. Hence, the state, the entire Sinhalese nation, owes obeisance to the Sangha, through the person of the king.

The sense of this theory is embodied vividly and forthrightly in the commentarial tradition, really an origin myth, which describes the conversion of the Emperor Aśoka himself to Buddhism. The emperor, says the Sinhalese account, was gazing out of the window of his palace when he espied a monk walking on his way, gazelle-like, beautiful, wrapped in the magnetic intensity of well Disciplined meditation. Drawn by this compelling vision of spiritual virtue, the emperor sent for the monk; when he entered the palace the monk unselfconsciously handed the emperor his begging bowl, stepped up to the throne, and seated himself. 'The very moment the emperor saw him approaching the throne he thought to himself, "Now, today itself, this monk will be master of this house."' And the monk proceeded to preach, converting the emperor to Buddhism.

In other words, over the political realm the monks reign both as exemplars and as preachers. The precedence awarded the Sangha betokens the precedence of their moral principles, so that the king rules by the Good Law, *Dhamma*. And under his moral sovereignty, backed by the Sangha's moral sovereignty, Sri Lanka is the Island of the Good Law, *Dhammadīpa*. The monasteries were to act as advisors to the king, and their preservation of the national chronicle of kings, the *Mahāvaṃsa* (Great Chronicle'), was, in this light, but an aspect of their advisory duty.

Furthermore, both the institution of kingship, and any particular king, were legitimated by this relation to the Sangha. This was expressed variously in the ceremony surrounding kingship and in the ceremonial acts and statements of kings. For example, the clay bowls which held the materials for royal consecration in the early period included earth taken from beneath the doorstep of several monastic institutions in the capital. King Saddhātissa (137–119 BC) is said to have offered the kingdom to the Sangha in the person of a famous monk, who returned it, saying, 'O great king, you have expressed your sense of devotion. We, on our part, return the kingdom given us. O great king, rule justly and righteously.' Other kings through the ages offered the kingdom or the symbols of sovereignty to the Sangha, only to have them returned: no theocracy for Sri Lanka. By the height of Sinhalese civilization the theory had led to even more baroque interpretations: a 10th-century inscription speaks of kingship being 'bestowed by the Sangha to protect the alms-bowls and robes of the Buddha', i.e. the Sangha and the Buddhist religion.

So far the theory. The practice entailed a number of consequences not entirely in keeping with the exemplary morality attributed to the Sangha, and these consequences appeared very early in Sinhalese history.

First, monks became the patrons of nationalism. When the early 2nd-century BC king, Duṭṭhagāmaṇī, went to war with a Tamil invader, he hung a relic of the Buddha on his spear and invited the Sangha to accompany him as a blessing. They responded, too, by telling him, after the bloody victory, that in reality only one-and-a-half human beings had been killed, a Buddhist and a partly converted Buddhist. The rest were no better than animals. It is a precedent called on, more today than for centuries, to justify bloodshed in the name of Buddhist nationalism.

By the end of the 2nd century BC the monasteries had revealed themselves in a second role, that of kingmakers: for they joined with a deceased king's ministers to pass over an elder son and confer the crown on a younger son. The elder son, Lañjatissa (119–109 BC) recaptured the throne and slighted the Sangha, but in the end relented and acted his proper part by bestowing gifts on them. The role of kingmaker stayed with the Sangha, as did the role of nationalist patron, throughout Sinhalese history. When one considers that the monks in the capital were becoming lords, and for that matter were often related to kings and ministers, these developments seem inevitable.

So the Sangha – or at least the monks of the capital – meddled with kings. But kings meddled with the Sangha, drawing it deeper into political matters and changing its internal constitution. To understand the significance of these changes, though, we will have to return briefly to the early Indian Sangha as depicted in the Discipline.

There we find clearly worked out a system of Sangha self-government based on two principles: the precedence of age, and the ratification of important decisions by total consensus. Thus, on the one hand, daily affairs, teaching, and administration rested in the hands of elder and (the emphasis was here) *wiser* monks, to whom the younger deferred. Authority was paternal, that is, in a way, generally similar to many traditional societies throughout the world. On the other hand, this paternal authority was balanced by a recognition that the whole Sangha – a body of men training themselves to make up their own minds and find their own salvation – had to agree on important points, among which were numbered the admission of new members, the censure of erring monks and the settlement of Disciplinary disputes. The procedure in such matters was this: the elders would put a proposal to the assembly of all fully ordained monks of an area three times, and that proposal was passed if the assembly remained silent all three times. It was an authoritarian

system, but it allowed for individual judgment and dissent.

This was its weakness. Such an organization can, by its nature, only succeed in small face-to-face groups, for its strength depends on the personal kin-like authority of elder over younger, and it demands that a consensus be continually maintained. There is no way to prevent schism; and schism had occurred before Buddhism came to Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, in the countryside, other problems came to the fore: monks were spread among the peasantry, and among the peasantry they were less concerned about consensus within the Sangha than about consensus with their parishioners.

In the capital, change took a different and more dire form: competition. For in the capital there was one layman, the king, whose resources and powers, and therefore ability to help or hinder, set him above all others. In the reign of King Vaṭṭagāmaṇī, in about 85 BC, twenty or so years after the Sangha had interfered in Lañjatissa's succession, the significance of the king's power and largesse became clear.

After driving out another Tamil invasion, the king bestowed a landed monastery in the capital on a monk, Mahātissa, from outside the capital, who had helped him in adversity, partly by settling a dispute between him and his generals. At that time perhaps the only monastery in the capital was the Mahāvihāra, the Great Monastery, founded a century-and-a-half before by the original missionaries; and the inhabitants of the Great Monastery were deeply incensed over this gift within their bailiwick, and perhaps also over the influence wielded by this interloper. They gathered to impose expulsion on Mahātissa, on the grounds that he was 'frequenting the families of laymen', i.e. enjoying the confidence of the king. Mahātissa's pupil, Tissa, protested. He in turn was suspended. Tissa thereupon went with a large following of monks to the monastery – Abhayagiri – given to his teacher, and carried on, despite the Great Monastery, with the patronage of the king.

This series of events set a pattern that was to persist throughout the history of Buddhist Sri Lanka: Saṅgha involvement in politics, royal involvement in the Sangha, competition. The Great Monastery–Abhayagiri split lasted more than a thousand years, until another king, the draconian Parakkamabāhu I (AD 1153–86) effected a reconciliation among a weakened Sangha, who had lost much of their old structure. The Great Monastery tradition, which alone survives, would have us believe that the Abhayagiri were heretics, but this is almost certainly a vast exaggeration. The only list of actual disagreements records several minor points of Discipline, and on that evidence the Abhayagiri seem to have been slightly more strait-laced. No, it was schism over competition, sheer competition and competition for the king's favour.

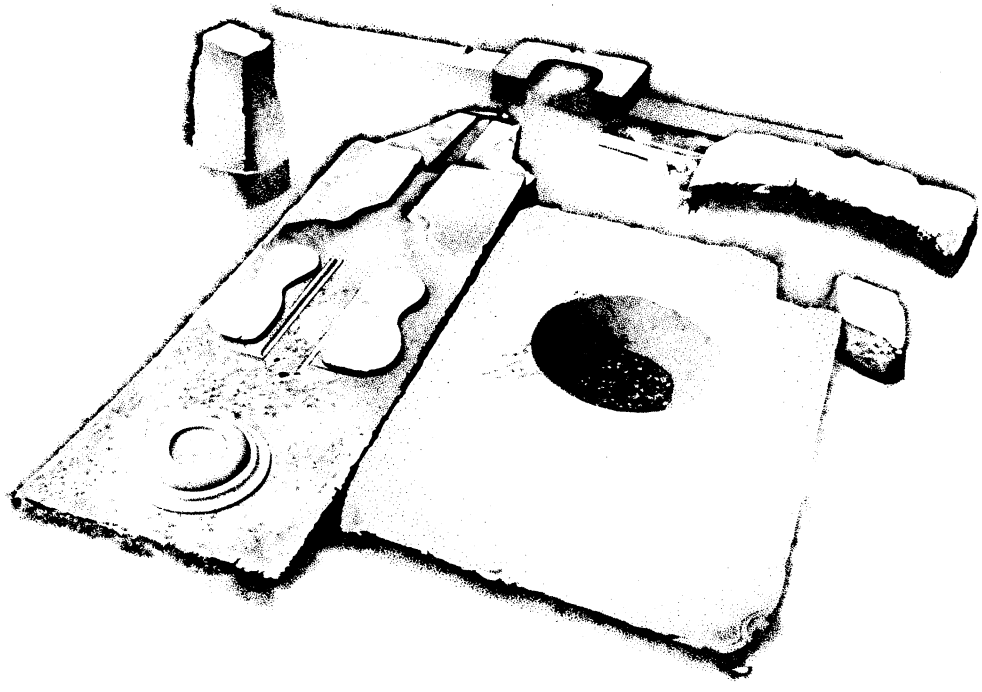
In this dispute the king might merely have played the passive part of a well-intentioned but over-generous donor. On other occasions, however, the precedent was set for kings to intervene actively to settle disputes which the Sangha's archaic constitution could not handle. Thus, about a hundred years after the fatal gift to Mahātissa, King Kanirajānu (AD 29–32) came to settle a dispute at Mihintale, near the capital, apparently by actually entering the assembly of monks itself. Sixty monks did not accept the king's ruling, however, and plotted to kill him on the spot. He had them thrown in a dungeon. Kings did not always have their own way, though; Sīlameghavaṇṇa (617–626 AD) later tried and failed to resolve the Great Monastery–Abhayagiri split, and the Great Monastery elders simply ignored him. Angered, he betook himself to the south of the island, and there died, as the national chronicle puts it, 'without having asked the pardon of the Sangha'. Though there were other occasions on which the king intervened but failed to impose his will, in general lay authority, lying ultimately with the king, came regularly to apply to the Sangha where its own sanctions were weak or non-existent.

In fact, this activity of the monarch was raised to a duty: the duty to purify the Sangha. The precedent goes back in legend to the Emperor Aśoka, who disrobed the lazy, corrupted gourmet monks and upheld the Disciplined bearers of the true Theravāda. Many previous interventions of the king in Ceylon have later been interpreted in this light, but the first mention of it being done in a sytematically legal way is in the reign of Moggallāna I (AD 491–508). From descriptions of subsequent purifications it appears that the king actually stood in the assembly while the Sangha carried out the Act of Law according to its ancient method: proposal and assent by silence. These Acts of Law were of several kinds, but they had basically one of two effects. Either they expelled the offending monk, or they forced him to become legally the pupil and dependant of another monk.

The Sri Lankan sources are unequivocal in stating that this was always a matter of cleansing the Sangha of un-Disciplined monks; and no doubt principle frequently played a part. But two other motives should be noted. First, competition: if the Great Monastery–Abhayagiri split was any indication, those who were cleansed from the Sangha might have justifiably held the view that they were no less Disciplined than the cleansers, but that they were simply of the wrong party. Second, a purification may have had other effects, such as the freeing of property, which had accumulated over generations in the hands of the Sangha, to the Crown. In supporting the party of Discipline, therefore, the king's conscience and his best interests may have pointed in the same direction.

The monk as forest-dweller

The cumulative effect of the Sangha's embroilment with lay life was therefore in many ways contrary to the strict ideal of moral purity. Yet the norms of the thus domesticated Sangha never fully replaced the ascetic ideal, which lived on, at least in texts and folklore, and



A urinal stone from the Jetavana monastery, Sri Lanka. Some of these stones have been found carved with the likenesses of palatial buildings, indicating the contempt felt by the forest-dwelling monks for worldly riches.

often in the flesh. What did happen, however, was that the Sangha came to be seen as being composed of two parties. There are different formulations of these parties, corresponding to slightly different conceptions, but one is clearly the village Sangha: preachers, teachers and scholars and village-dwellers. The other consists of ascetics, meditators and forest-dwellers. Ascetic, meditator, forest-dweller: this is wholly in keeping with the ideal of the monk as passive exemplar, and even suggests that more archaic image of the solitary ascetic, glowing with spiritual strenuousness. What is clear, however, is that from very early on they were defined in opposition to the village Sangha, rather than as the original Sangha still preserved. Two pieces of evidence illustrate this very well.

First, the *Visuddhimagga*, i.e. *Path of Purification*, a 5th-century compendium of doctrine written as a manual for meditators, prescribes the steps to be taken by a monk intent on his own salvation; and, far from assuming that the monk has joined the Sangha with salvation in mind, it presupposes that he is already a member of a Sangha with quite different pre-occupations. It advises, for example, that the renouncer cannot simply go to find a meditation teacher, but must first leave his monastery in good hands, finish any building in progress, and find a teacher for his pupils. And he must take care to avoid busy monasteries, popular monasteries, monasteries near (read 'owning') cultivated land. Meditation, in other words, was clearly a special vocation, an alternative to the established village Sangha.

The second piece of evidence is archaeological. In Anurādhapura and elsewhere there exist the ruins of a type of monastery used by the meditating monks. In keeping with these monks' strict simplicity, the monasteries are very simple, in contrast to the ornate decorations of more worldly monasteries. They are very simple in every detail, that is, save one: for found among the ruins are large flat stones, carved elaborately with the likeness of palatial buildings of the sort then built for ordinary monks in the capital. The stones have holes drilled through them, and there is no doubt about their use. They are urinals. Such was the disdain the ascetics felt for the glories of monastic civilization.

So the landed ceremonial specialists dominated; but the national chronicle holds many brief references to ascetics, meditators, or forest-dwellers, and they were undoubtedly there almost continuously, a usually silent minority – living evidence of the Sangha's original heritage.

From contemporary evidence it is possible to suggest that, though from principle they attempted to avoid intervening in lay affairs, they must have exerted one significant effect: they must have held before the eyes of the Sinhalese a pure picture of the Discipline, which was elsewhere commingled with quite different sorts of behaviour. It is also possible to suggest that, far from being an unbroken tradition, asceticism and meditation continually disappeared and reappeared. On the one hand, monks and laymen, inspired by the voluminous literature on the subject, frequently started ascetic movements. On the other hand, such movements, with the passage of time, recapitulated the history of the Sangha as a whole, and gradually those who belonged to them became village ceremonial specialists, settled on their own fruitful land. This is the historical source of the peculiar pattern, found in other Theravāda countries as well as Sri Lanka, that some groups of monks identify themselves as 'forest-dwellers' or as ascetics, whereas in fact their practice is indistinguishable from that of ordinary monks around them.

Indeed it is possible to show this process in the life of a single monk whose career is a fitting summary for this discussion of monks' roles, since it illustrates how easily one version of the Sangha blends with another. The monk, Välivita Saraṇaṃkara, was born at the end of the 17th century in the Kandyan kingdom. He became a novice in adolescence, and his youthful idealism and energy were set a formidable task, for there was no longer a higher ordination tradition in Sri Lanka. The incumbents of the landed temples had ceased even to wear the yellow robes, and their morality consisted, as did that of the landed Sangha at the time of an earlier reform, in supporting their wives and children. The young Saraṇaṃkara had to revive the tradition of learning so that he could discover what the Discipline had been; and, though not properly ordained, he and the band of fellow ascetics who gathered around him tried to live by all 227 rules. In their fervour they insulted the landed temple incumbents on account of moral laxity.

It was not a wise move. The only person who had the authority to bring monks from abroad to renew the higher ordination tradition that Saraṇaṃkara so fervently desired was the king, but among the king's ministers were such incumbents. Saraṇaṃkara's noble birth gave him access to the king, so he went to court to plead his cause. But his rivals had got there first. He was banished to a very wild backward region, along with his fellows.

In a sense he might have been better advised to remain in exile, for only the jungle fastnesses could have preserved his apolitical ascetic purity. But he was somehow reinstated, and served as tutor to the next king. It was not until the reign of the following king, however, that his dream was realized: monks came from Thailand in 1753 to ordain Saraṇaṃkara and his followers, as well as the landed temple incumbents. That was the beginning of the Siyam Nikāya, the largest line of pupillary succession in Sri Lanka today, accounting for well over half the monks in the island. (This group is divided into 'forest-dwellers' and 'village-dwellers', though there is no difference in their practices.) And Saraṇaṃkara had other successes as well: he was appointed Sangharāja, King of the Sangha, an honorary title with little real power; and he received monasteries with lands.

But the journey from homeless ascetic to worldly involvement did not end there. For he was later implicated in a conspiracy to murder the king. The reason for this is obscure, but may well have been that the king, though a supporter of Buddhism for political reasons, was in fact a Tamil Hindu.

What is remarkable is the relative ease with which Saraṇaṃkara moved from one role to another. Once he wished to act decisively for Discipline, he could only go to court; and once at court all else followed. Saraṇaṃkara is unusual in the energy which took him through the full spectrum of possibilities, from ascetic to would-be kingmaker. Yet the spectrum exists, even today, for all monks, according to their abilities, inclinations and opportunities; so closely entwined in Sinhalese Buddhism are the different conceptions that have grown up of the monk. Few monks fall wholly into one type, whether ascetic or politician, landlord or scholar.

The modern Sangha

Today there are very approximately 20,000 monks in Sri Lanka, of whom about 600 are listed in a government census as genuine forest-dwellers. The forest monks exist chiefly as the founders or descendants of a reform movement that swept the island in the late 1940s and early 50s, and they are still relatively much more strict than the village-dwelling monks in general. The latter number among themselves many types, from the landed incumbents of the old Kandyan monastic estates (some of whom call themselves 'forest-dwellers'), through learned English-speaking scholars in the universities, to young monks in country temples more interested in leisure than in chanting *pirit*. Though this variety is largely explicable in the terms already discussed, there have been two changes which lend a particularly modern flavour to the contemporary Sangha. The first came about through the British conquest of Ceylon in 1815, the second through national Independence in 1947.

The first change was the development of the modern *nikāyas*, a word which might be best translated as 'family of pupillary succession'. All the monks of a *nikāya* trace their lineage back to a particular elder – and through him, of course, back to the Buddha. The oldest *nikāya* in Sri Lanka now is the Siyam Nikāya, which traces its lineage back to the eldest of the monks who came from Thailand in 1753 to renew the higher ordination tradition. The last Kandyan kings decreed in effect that all monks must be of this *nikāya*, by commanding that all monks must be ordained in Kandy by the monks of that line. This was to insure the purity (at least in caste, for all monks were to be of the highest caste) and the unity of the Sangha, under the king's control, although even at the best of times kings never long retained such control. On the British-controlled coast before conquest, and throughout the island after conquest, monks started other *nikāyas*, either by simply holding their ordinations elsewhere, or by bringing a new ordination tradition from Southeast Asia. In 1803 the Amarapura Nikāya began, and sheltered under its name more and more *nikāyas* until at present there are about twenty-six under its aegis. The Siyam Nikāya itself subdivided, and the third great *nikāya*, the Rāmañña, began in 1865. Just as the Sangha had once been spoken of as 'the eight establishments', it is now spoken of as 'the three Nikāyas' ... though each of those is subdivided into smaller 'families'. They differ chiefly by the region, the caste and/or the Disciplinary purity of their monks.

Some modern monks have complained that it was the British refusal to regulate the Sangha that resulted in

this, in their words, 'schism' and 'decay'. But in fact the modern Sangha may have thereby come rather to resemble the early Sangha, before the intervention of a Buddhist king: many small fraternities, each its own family, so to speak, but united by very similar observances of Discipline – or by similar lack of Discipline – and enjoying very similar positions in society. No longer do monks compete for the largesse of a king. Rather, they compete for a clientèle in their immediate area who support them on a small-scale, nearly day-to-day basis. They must not be seen to depart *too* spectacularly from the Discipline; and fresh reform movements springing up frequently, especially in the south, act as their conscience. The Sangha probably does better without a king.

The second change was more recent. National Independence in 1947 signalled a metamorphosis in the Sri Lankan political order, and with it a reinterpretation of the Sangha's role for some monks. Under the democratic constitution, politics was opened as a legitimate arena for everyone's participation; and the public welfare likewise became everyone's affair in a way never possible in the ancient Order. These changes bore on Sangha affairs in many ways, of which two may be singled out: a new idea of the monk's political responsibilities was born; and therewith the idea of the monk's social responsibilities was expanded.

First, monks in politics: in the ancient Order, and still to a large extent under the British, the involvement of individual monks in politics depended upon their connections with the king or with powerful families. It is indeed the way the landed aristocratic Kandyan monks still operate. With the new democratic order, however, and with the influx of liberal, socialist and Marxist views from the West, it became possible for anyone to consider himself a political animal, and to organize for political ends. In this atmosphere there appeared a new category of monk, the 'political' monk. In 1946 the Venerable Walpola Rahula, a monk from the intellectually and religiously active south, wrote an apology for this new role. He cited the precedents of Sangha involvement in the ancient kingdom, but interpreted that involvement as public-spirited responsibility for the nation as a whole – a complicated sentiment, compounded partly of modern democratic values, partly of ancient nationalism and the old view of the Sangha as compassionate teacher to the world.

This view, in one form or another, took hold, and many monks today regard it as part of their duty to guide their parishioners politically. They also began with Independence to form into political pressure groups. Only in one election, however, that of 1956, could the Sangha be regarded as having had a specific political effect in its own right. That was the year of the 2,500th anniversary of Buddhism, an occasion long heralded by prophecies of revival. What this meant in practice was that the Sangha (or rather less than a quarter of it) aligned itself to reject the relative ascendancy of Christian Sinhalese and Tamil Hindus in

A modern Buddha image made of coconut palm-leaves and carried in procession at Vesak, the anniversary of the Buddha's birth, Enlightenment and death.

government, to foster Sinhalese as the national official language, and to make of Sri Lanka the Buddhist nationalist state it once was. These issues were of such appeal that the Sangha came as close as it ever has to uniting behind a single opinion. The election of their candidate, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, brought about some of the desired changes, and led to the adoption of the idiom of Buddhist nationalism in many spheres of government. That some things had not changed since Kandyan times, however, was revealed when a monk very active in electing Bandaranaike was convicted of assassinating him.

On second glance, in fact, the actual conduct of present-day political monks is not so different from that of their traditional role as politicians. True, the new institution of elections widens their sphere of activity, but it is still by virtue of prestige and through personal ties that most monks influence government. And their

one effective deed, the promotion of Buddhist nationalism, has a precedent 2,000 years old in the monks who encouraged King Duṭṭhagāmaṇī. Today the Sangha pressure groups have split along party lines and represent partisan political opinion, and the laity is quite sensitive to this demeaning of the Sangha's apolitical ideal. The very term 'political monk' is in many circles pejorative; and when a monk ran for the National State Assembly in 1977, he lost his deposit. Monks will no doubt continue to appear on election platforms, but in so doing they will always be vulnerable to criticism from the viewpoint of Discipline.

Many of these same moral ambiguities attach to the wider conception of the Sangha's active ideal, its 'work for the world', which accompanied the new Western ideas embodied in electoral democracy. A new phrase was found, 'social service'. Social service includes most of the sort of activities a public-spirited clergyman might undertake in the West: ministering to the poor, commenting on public morality, even helping to set up co-operatives. Many temples have allowed their grounds to be used to set up local weaving schools, and temple buildings are often used for meetings of local cultivators' groups of various kinds. Most conspicuous among these services is education. On the one hand, some monastery schools receive government grants to provide primary education. On the other hand, monks have been taken into the national education system as schoolteachers, and into the university system as lecturers. In fact two universities have been set up in association with two advanced seminaries for monks in the capital, Colombo, and the Venerable Walpola Rahula has acted as vice-chancellor of one of them.

Yet the criticism of these new roles has been severe. Certainly the Discipline does not envision allowing monks to receive salaries as schoolteachers. Nor does it seem proper to conservatives that a monk should go to university to learn subjects, such as geography or sociology, that have nothing to do with the monk's position. One may imagine their reaction to monks who have actually gone to work in the paddy fields with their bare hands. One limit to the social service of the Sangha was recently drawn by a judge. A monk, trained in law at one of the university campuses, applied to practise at the bar, causing a well publicized uproar. The matter was finally settled when the judge ruled that he could not practise without the traditional garb of white shirt, dark tie and suit!

In fact, from the viewpoint of Discipline, these new roles and the problems that go with them are not very different from the old. In an inscription of the 12th century, for example, a king found it necessary to decree, according to Discipline, that monks should not accept pay for teaching. The same inscription proclaimed that monks should enter villages only on business such as begging alms or preaching, and only with the strict permission of the monastery head. This was a version of the Disciplinary rules against 'frequenting the families of lay folk': a charge once laid against King Vaṭṭagāmaṇī's favourite monk, Mahātissa, and still laid against 'political' monks today. Nor is this the mere application of outmoded standards in a modern world: the monk is still defined by separation from lay society, the higher morality, the value of self-salvation from suffering. Any individual monk may act differently, but the Sangha as a whole cannot think of itself in any other way. The duty to laymen must still stand on the duty to Discipline.

For many laymen today, this double duty of the Sangha is vividly dramatized every year. For, on ordinary occasions, they support their local monk, and call on him for merit making; but once a year they travel in a busload to one of the centres of forest-dwelling monks, and there spend a day worshipping, giving alms, listening to the monks' words, and imbibing the spirit of forest asceticism. For the laymen it matters little that their village monk may have as much Discipline as the forest monks. And the village monks, too, venerate the meditative, ascetic ideal. As one put it: 'In this life it is enough that I work here in the village. How else would the villagers hear the Buddha's word? Perhaps with the merit [acquired in this work] I'll be able to go to the forest in my next life.' In this broad compassionate view, can there be any doubt that the Sangha has room for all?